ON PRAYER

2. DOES IT REALLY WORK?

November 10, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan
Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Matthew 7:7-11

"For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds..."
-Matthew 7:8 (NRSV)

When you pray, Jesus said, do not stand on a street corner, but go into your room and close the door.

When you pray, Jesus said, don't heap up empty words.

Pray like this, he said:

> "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
> Your kingdom come, your will be done.
> Give us this day our daily bread.
> Forgive us our debts
> as we forgive our debtors..."

And then, a little later, he made the matter very complicated by saying:

> "Everyone who asks receives. Is there anyone among you who if your child asks for bread will give a stone?"

You can be sure of one thing, and it is that the people to whom he was speaking at the moment - Peter, James, John, Mary, Martha - knew very well that there are times when your child asks for bread you say "no" because there is no bread to give, and furthermore, that there are times when your child asks for bread and you say "no" because your child doesn't need any more bread.

So you can be sure they understood perfectly that when he said, "ask, and it will be given to you," he did not mean, "ask God for whatever you want and God will provide it."

What, then, did he mean and what do we believe? Does praying make any difference and if not, why bother with it? Does it really work?

The first thing a theologian or preacher does with that question is get away from it as quickly as possible. That's the wrong question, we are inclined to say. That's a typically American question, the utilitarian, functional approach to a complex matter. The correct question is always, "What does it mean?" not "Does it work?" Sometimes theology is a matter of helping us know what the right questions are, and sometimes that is merely a device to avoid dealing with the real agenda. For better or worse, "Does it work?" happens to be the question we ask. We have been exposed to empiricism and several centuries of the scientific method. If it doesn't work, we are inclined to conclude that it doesn't mean anything. It may not be the only way to measure truth, but whether it works isn't a bad place to begin... unless you are content with living by empty rituals, throwing salt over your shoulder to ward off evil spirits, rain dances, and expecting a World Series in Wrigley Field. The simple fact is, "Does it work?" is the question we ask and if the preacher won't address it or ask it, popular literature certainly will and does.

In her effort to civilize him, the widow tries to make a Christian out of Huck Finn and makes the mistake of telling him to pray and God will answer. Huck gives it a try and it doesn't work, and he never gives Christianity another thought.

In Anne Tyler's wonderful new novel, Saint Maybe, part of the story is about a small, store-front, fundamentalist church, Church of the Second Chance. At the Church's summer Bible camp, which happens in one of the member's family rooms, the next activity is Prayer Circle. The children sit in a circle:

> "'Our Lord in heaven,' Sister Myra said, 'we thank you for another beautiful day. Now we're going to offer up our sentence prayers as we do every morning at this time.'
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> "The last part was spoken more to the campers than to God, Thomas felt. Surely God knew by now they offered up sentence prayers every morning. He must know what they were going to say, since most of them just repeated what they said on other mornings. The girls said thank-you's, 'thank you for the trees and flowers' and such. The boys were more likely to make requests, 'Let the Orioles win tonight' was commonest. ('If it be thy will,' Sister Myra always added in a hurry.) The only exception was Dermott Kyle, who said, 'Thank you for air-conditioning.' That always got a laugh." [p. 136-137]

Cold Sassy Tree, is a wise and funny book by Olive Ann Burns that many of us were reading a few years ago. It is about life and love and faith in a small town in Georgia around the turn of the century. Grandpa and Will Tweedy, a young boy, are talking about Grandpa's unusual views about church and religion.

What goes on in church, Grandpa says, is "Poor-Mouthin," always askin' God to save us from temptation and sufferin' and death.

> "If'n you live, Will Tweedy, you go'n be tempted, and you go'n suffer, and you go'n die. Ain't no way out of it. But with the Lord's hep, you can stand up to temptation, and live th'ew the bad times and look death in the eye. You remember what I say, son."
>
> "Yessir, but I'd still like to hear you explain Jesus sayin, ast God for somethin' and you'll get it. One time I prayed for a million dollars, to test Him, and didn't get one dime."
>
> "That was just wishin'. Hit warn't prayin."

Let's begin with the problems.

It's probably not a good idea to play the old church game of my answered prayers are more dramatic than yours. It's easy to sound arrogant and condescending. Millions of people believe that God responded to a direct request... and I'm close enough to that never to presume to challenge it. There are, after all, limits to empiricism and rationalism. The best scientists are telling us to be cautious about assuring we know too much.

But, in fact, there are plenty of folk whose theology includes a God who arranges parking places and mortgage approvals, and helps out with daily decisions, as well as more conventional matters like good health and protection from danger. The trivialization of prayer becomes a theological problem when the God involved sounds like a celestial errand boy who can be prodded into activity by our prayers, or worse yet, a heavenly politician who lives by opinion polls and whose love and healing and miraculous intercession will be prompted if we get enough people praying.

David Willis, in a book on prayer, writes:

> "It is not that I minimize the clear witness of the Saints to the certainty of prayer in our relationship to God. It is just that I have been overwhelmed with the audacity which is involved in the act of invoking God. If praying is chatting

> with our alter-egos, or going through the motions of ancient custom, then it comes fairly easily, and can be refined by training. But if praying is talking to God in response to His involvement with us, then we best beware lest we confuse the Almighty with some divine chum." [Daring Prayer, p. 13]

The opposite of the chummy, ask-God-for-personal-favors approach to prayer, is a "God-beyond-reach," also a theological problem, a God, Walter Brueggemann says, is too omnipotent to be bothered with human need - suffering. The only appropriate attitude toward this God-beyond-reach is silence.

Sometimes it is not the skeptics and atheists who cannot believe in prayer, but devout believers, whose thoughtful notion of God includes a sense of God's transcendence and a deep reverence for natural processes, natural law which God, the argument goes, will not and cannot violate even to do something good without, in a sense, denying the goodness of the creation. Sometimes it is a profound sense of God that leads us to wonder about prayers.

The problems are not simple.

C. S. Lewis reasoned it through as you might expect, with a lot of grace and wit in a book of essays written to a friend, Letters to Malcom: Chiefly on Prayer. Lewis observed that the Bible seems to say contradictory things about prayer - that we should make our requests known to God - and that God already knows what we need. "We say we believe God is all-knowing," he pointed out, "yet a great deal of prayer seems to consist of giving information." [p. 19]

Why bother? The answer is that prayer according to Jesus -who both did a lot of it and taught his followers to pray - prayer according to Jesus is primarily an expression of a new and personal and intimate relationship with God, brought about by trust and faith in him.

Jesus did not teach a new method of Transcendental Meditation. What he announced was a whole new way of relating to God - a way that was new and real and personal and intimate, the best analogy for which is the relationship within a family. Jesus did not begin his own praying, nor did he teach his followers to begin praying, by addressing God as Almighty, Omnipotent, the Ground of All Being, the mystery in the universe. Praying begins with a stunning, magnificent confession of faith contained in the intimate words, "Our Father."

The God to whom all praying is directed is, according to Jesus, primarily parental... a mother hen who folds baby chicks

Does prayer work? You bet. Did it work when you brought the content of your heart to your mother or father, or to someone who was father or mother to you? Did it work when your heart was broken and grief filled your soul and you were able to tell it to your mother; or your disappointment, or fear, or hopes, or dreams to your father? Did it work when you told them your heart's desire?

I think so. I know so, even when it didn't or couldn't turn out the way you wished.

Does it make a difference when you pray for someone else? To say, as we do, "You are in my prayers," is to signal something about our relationship, a gesture of caring. It is to say, "I want my love to be a resource for you." Episcopal theologian John Yungblut put it a very helpful way:

> "One thing is quite obvious: with process of intercessory prayer I become a more sensitive, more concerned, more responsive human being. Something happens to me that I know is good. I am for the moment moving in the direction of becoming a better person. And I believe something else is happening, less obvious, but non-the-less real. I believe my prayer works both for God and for the person. It does something. I don't want to say what it does, because I don't understand it..." Then Yungblut brings it close to home by discussing praying for a friend who is critically ill. "In my prayer for my friend, I provide God an additional channel for the movement of his energies to my friend. I believe my prayer on his behalf does something good for my friend, whether he recovers or dies." [Rediscovering Prayer, p. 127]

So of course we pray and we pray without ceasing, I think, because the older we become the more things we care about passionately. And so we pray for our dear ones, and our children and their children, and all the children who in some way are ours, and we pray for the world and for peace and our city, and our church. And we pray for our dear ones and for ones who should be dear but aren't. And we pray for homeless ones and successful ones and we pray for safety and health and success and, yes sometimes rain and victory. And when we don't know what else to do or say, we pray for and about Magic Johnson or about anyone else who one day in the full bloom of life tells us they are HIV positive. We do it, not because we believe the words will elicit an automatic response, but because we are willing to trust the most radical proposition of all, namely that in Jesus Christ God has come among us, and lived like us and died like us and throughout has shown us grace and unfailing love. And for

under her wings, a father who runs down the road to welcome his prodigal child. The God Jesus taught actually heard prayers, is not a heavenly potentate, but the God the prophet Isaiah described like this:

> "Can a woman forget her nursing child,
> or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
>
> Even these may forget, yet I
> will not forget you." [Isaiah 49:15]

The whole point is that the God Jesus reveals is a God who chooses to be human in order to love, and in the process chooses to love within the limits of humankind.

Parents are not omnipotent. Mine weren't - nor were yours. I'm not - although I'd like to be. Part of parenting is to know painfully that you can't give your child everything. And a particularly strenuous part of the assignment is not giving something you could give for the health and well-being of the child. Not giving as a way of expressing love; every parent knows what that is. And, so thoughtfully, do we all when we reflect on it later. I don't hear people talking about how their parents provided everything they wanted. I do hear people talk, with no little pride and affection, about the limits, about what their parents could not, or chose not to give them. And from the perspective of years, fully seeing the love in that.

Jesus first of all taught his followers the limits of God by praying not to the Lord of the Universe, which God also certainly is, but to "Our Father." It's the whole point of the incarnation: a God who loves us so thoroughly to become one of us, to live our life, to endure our suffering, to die our death.

I confess, my prayers begin automatically, and always have. "Almighty God," - and I have to remind myself that in Jesus Christ, God set aside Almightiness and took on humanness, limits and love.

That's what praying "in Jesus' Name" means, by the way. "In Jesus' Name" or "through Jesus Christ our Lord" is not the secret code, like that sequence of numbers which gains you access to the cash machine, or the church parking lot - although some people seem to believe that's exactly what it is. To pray "in Jesus' Name" is to confess that the God to whom we pray is the God who was revealed in Jesus, a God who purposely took on the limits of humanness in order to demonstrate the power of love. It is a reminder that our God is not the nameless, faceless mystery behind the universe, but one who has fully known our humanness and fully knows us.

our sake - our wholeness, happiness, salvation - wants us to be close enough to bring all the content of our hearts.

Olive Ann Burns, whose charming novel, Cold Sassy Tree, I quoted earlier, only got to write one book. There was a brief note on the fly leaf that she tried writing fiction "for something more exciting to think about than fever and chemotherapy." And then a while ago I read in the book pages of the newspaper that she had died. And so that's why I got the book off the shelf and looked for that passage on prayer because it was what was on her heart, obviously, and because in eloquent simplicity it expresses the mystery of our faith, and also the reason why we pray, and why it most certainly works.

Grandpa said:

> "Will Tweedy, you go'n be tempted, and you go'n suffer, and you go'n die. Ain't no way out of it. But with the Lord's hep, you can stand up to temptation, and live th'ew the bad times, and look Death in the eye."

Does it really work?

Of course.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.